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May 20, 2003

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WASHINGTON - In recent testimony to Congress, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom called on the President and Congress to hold Khartoum to its word that a just peace will be reached by June. The Commission submitted testimony to the House Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on Africa, on "Reviewing the Sudan Peace Act Report." If an agreement is not reached by the end of June, as asserted by the government of Sudan and the SPLM/A, the President and Congress should re-evaluate if the government of Sudan has engaged in good faith negotiations to achieve a permanent peace agreement. If it is determined that the government of Sudan has not negotiated in good faith, then the President should consider initiating those measures laid out in Section 6 (b)(2) of the Sudan Peace Act. The Commission will continue to monitor closely the progress of peace negotiations.

USCIRF Chair Felice D. Gaer said, "While U.S. officials are characterizing the impending agreement as a 'diplomatic touchdown,' the Commission is perplexed at this level of optimism when so many significant issues remain to be negotiated between the parties. Moreover, there is a misleading tendency throughout the Sudan Peace Act report to present an equivalency between the actions of the government of Sudan and the SPLM/A, especially the sections on ground offensives and on slavery/abductions. For example, the report refers to an investigation of the International Eminent Persons Group in May 2002 that concluded that both the Sudanese government and the SPLM/A were guilty of forced abductions. However, it does not go into any detail about the extent to which each party was guilty."

Because religious freedom has been a major issue in Sudan's civil war, the Commission urges the United States to oppose the application of Sharia law to non-Muslims wherever they may reside in the country. The USCIRF also urges that, because Sudan is to continue in the near future as a unified State, national institutions such as the military, law enforcement, and the highest level of the judiciary be secular.

The testimony also assessed the State Department's reports to Congress pursuant to the Sudan Peace Act, finding them deficient in several areas. The Commission credits the Administration for becoming engaged on the issue of bringing peace to the people of Sudan, for working toward a peace agreement, and for other salutary aspects of its policies on Sudan. Nevertheless, the State Department's reporting is deficient in several important respects under the requirements of the Sudan Peace Act. While the reports note government of Sudan violations of ceasefire commitments and state that these violations must stop, they do not give an accurate picture of the situation, nor do they articulate consequences for further violations. In particular, the reporting does not adequately address the fear that the government of Sudan is delaying progress in peace talks in order to advance its military might and strategic position vis-à-vis the SPLM/A, thereby seeking a military victory over the south rather than a negotiated peace.

The Commission continued to make several additional recommendations for U.S. policy, including:

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oppose the application of Sharia law to non-Muslims wherever they may reside in the country;

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urge that, because Sudan is to continue in the near future as a unified State, national institutions such as the military, law enforcement, and the highest level of the judiciary, be secular;

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insist that the capital of a reunited north and south Sudan, most likely Khartoum, be a place where people of all faiths can worship freely and where the laws are reflective and respectful of all religions and legal traditions in Sudan;

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disperse funding quickly for humanitarian purposes that will be supportive of the peace process and immediately release funding to build civil society and to promote economic development in southern Sudan; Congress should appropriate immediately the \$100 million in aid this year for southern Sudan, as well as in FY 2004 and 2005, as authorized in the Sudan Peace Act "to prepare the population for peace and democratic governance;"

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continue to keep in place existing sanctions on Sudan and refrain from upgrading diplomatic relations with the government in Khartoum;

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continue to push for access for delivery of humanitarian assistance and expand humanitarian relief where it is most needed; and

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build upon the work of the International Eminent Persons Group (IEPG) to combat and end the terrible practice of abduction and enslavement by government-sponsored militias, such as establishing a permanent monitoring mechanism.

The full testimony can be found on the Commission's Web site at www.uscirf.gov.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

- Felice D. Gaer ,
Dean Michael K. Young ,